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ABSTRACT

This digest examines the use of standardized, nationally normed testing in assessing the progress of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students and describes alternative forms of assessment. For years, researchers have criticized the overuse of standardized, nationally normed tests to assess learner and school success. Problems with such testing are compounded for AI/AN learners by the common disregard for the diversity of languages and cultures among Native learners. Researchers have suggested that many standardized tests are inappropriate for Native students, and have concluded that public school reliance on such tests may hurt Native Americans. The popularity of IQ and other standardized testing has also encouraged a mindset that looks for deficiencies in the individuals being tested or in their cultures, rather than in the tests themselves. Before the European conquest of America, nearly all Native peoples used forms of performance-based assessment to determine how each individual could best contribute to the survival of the tribe, clan, or village. Performance-based assessment directly examines accomplishment of specific tasks that are important for life; current forms include student portfolios, student performances, teacher observations, interviews, self- and group assessments, work sampling, and extended tasks. Development of performance-based assessment tools forces schools to relate curriculum to present and future real-life situations. Such assessment is supported by the Indian education community and is being implemented in a growing number of tribally controlled schools. Contains 18 references. (SV)

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ASSESSMENT FOR AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE LEARNERS

ERIC DIGEST

By: Roger Bordeaux

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Assessment for American Indian and Alaska Native Learners

by Roger Bordeaux, Ed.D.

ERIC DIGEST

THIS DIGEST EXAMINES the use of standardized, nationally normed testing in assessing the progress of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students. It describes studies that have shown the inadequacies of these assessment methods as well as theories that attempted to explain the poor test results of the AI/AN population. The Digest then describes alternatives to standardized testing—particularly performance-based assessment—recommended by Native and non-Native educators and researchers.

Criticism of Current Assessment Measures

For years, various researchers have criticized the overuse of standardized nationally normed tests to assess learner and school success (Guerin & Maier, 1983; Shepard, 1989; Sperling, 1994). The problems with using such testing are compounded for AI/AN learners by the common disregard for the diversity of languages and cultures among Native learners from more than 500 tribes, clans, and villages.

Chrisjohn and Lanigan (n.d.) recently objected to five major characteristics of the research using intelligence test scores of North American Indians: Pan-Indianism (the tendency to assign common traits to all Native groups), small sample sizes, use of inappropriate instruments, lack of fundamental psychometric research, and lack of theory. Williams and Gross (1990) evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of six commercially developed tests designed to measure various levels of oral and listening proficiency. Their final analysis recommended limiting the use of commercial instruments in assessing Yupik Eskimo students in western Alaska. Cantrall, Pete, and Fields (1990), in a program evaluation study, concluded that the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) was inappropriate for Navajo learners. Nichols (1991) reviewed the education literature and summarized findings from the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force hearings held across the country in the early 1990s. He concluded that public school reliance on standardized testing may hurt Native Americans, and reported on indicators that some educators have found more useful, such as skill mastery, student portfolios, and attitudinal measures.

Ever since IQ and other standardized testing gained popularity, mainstream observers have theorized reasons for the poor test results of some groups. These theories tended to look only for deficiencies in the people being tested and not for deficiencies in the tests themselves. For example, the IQ deficit theory held that students from minority and low socioeconomic backgrounds do poorly because they lack intelligence due to genetic deficiencies. However, Villegas (1991) cites research that shows the failure of IQ tests to measure important features of intelligence; the unreliability of intelligence testing due to test administration factors; and the inconclusiveness of basic assumptions about IQ and its inheritability.

Another theory suggests that minority students' difficulties are sociocultural rather than genetic in origin. Critics of this cultural deficit theory point out that *differences* do not necessarily represent *deficiencies* in the upbringing of minority children. Villegas recommends that teachers respect the learning capability of all students and thus maintain high expectations for all children, regardless of background.

Alternatives to Current Standardized Testing

> *For White-Man-Runs-Him, as for all youth, games were real-life situations in the miniature that taught important cultural values. His youth was filled with play designed to educate and prepare him to fulfill his future role as an adult Crow warrior. In the Crow way it seemed everyone was a teacher, including his father, grandfathers, uncles, and a variety of interested educators.* (Harcey & Croone, 1993, p. 35)

Before the European conquest of the Americas, nearly all Native peoples used performance-based assessment—as suggested above—to determine how each individual could best contribute to the survival of the tribe, clan, or village. As children grew up, adults observed them to determine their knowledge and skill development. Children exhibited different levels of knowledge and skill in tasks such as hunting, running, consensus building, healing, and spiritual leadership. Children who demonstrated superior performance were the ones who later led hunting parties, provided spiritual guidance, served as orators for the people, and performed other necessary tasks for the group.

Today, such performance-based assessment is regaining wide acceptance as a way to evaluate learner success. Educators have begun to question the uses of standardized, norm-referenced tests (including achievement, aptitude, ability, and intelligence tests). No longer are such tests so widely viewed as the best (or only) way to measure learner success. The increased use of performance-based assessment may help give AI/AN communities more legitimate evaluations of Native learners' knowledge and skills.

Performance-based assessment directly examines student performance on specific tasks that are important for life (Worthen, 1993). The federal government defined performance standards as "concrete examples and explicit definitions of what students have to know and be able to do to demonstrate that such students are proficient in . . . skills and knowledge" (PL 103-227-Goals 2000: Educate America Act, 1994, p. 129). Some forms of performance-based assessment include student portfolios, student performances,

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teacher observations, interviews, self-assessments, work sampling, group assessments, and extended tasks.

Herman, Aschbacher, and Winters (1992) describe a variety of methods for determining the success of learners. Other examples of successful programs are available from the College Board; the National Center for Educational Outcomes; the National Center for Research in Education, Standards, and Student Testing; and the New Standards Project (Work in Progress, 1994).

The Indian education community has identified performance-based assessment as necessary for school improvement. The final report of the White House Conference on Indian Education (1992) contained several resolutions stating that culturally appropriate alternative assessment instruments should be used by those educating AI/AN students. The final report of the U.S. Department of Education's Indian Nations At Risk Task Force (1991) recommended that school officials and educators use appropriate evaluation and assessment information. In doing so, they will improve instruction and help students explore the connection between knowledge gained in school and success in life. In a report for the Bureau Effective Schools Team (BEST), Bancroft (1989) supported the idea of using varied measures to determine pupil progress and program performance in schools funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Possible Benefits of Performance-Based Assessment for AI/AN Learners

The development of performance-based assessment tools forces schools to relate school curriculum to present and future real-life situations. For AI/AN students, these real-life situations include use of Native languages in various settings, understanding of value systems specifically related to their culture, and mastery of traditional ceremonies.

The annual report (1993) on the BIA Office of Indian Education Programs documents the progress of the school reform movement. Many individual schools reported evidence of growing use of a variety of measures of student progress. For example, Quileute Tribal School in Washington and Chuska Boarding School in New Mexico now use portfolio assessment. Another example of the influence of culture on performance-based assessment is the adoption by the Sisseton Wahpeton School Board (1994) of the five Dakota values of OHODA (respect), OKCIYA (generosity), TEHINDA (extreme tenderness), WICAKE (honesty) and WAUNSIDA (compassion) as guiding values for Tiospa Zina Tribal School. They are now proceeding to develop ways of demonstrating performance.

Conclusion

Standardized norm-referenced testing is no longer universally accepted as the one best method for determining learner success. Although some AI/AN students have shown academic success in this type of testing, the continued exclusive use of norm-referenced assessments could shortchange many AI/AN learners. One caution, however, for those involved in developing alternative assessment measures: The effort to improve cultural relevance of curriculum and assessment must be guided by all stakeholders, including parents and other tribal community members.

The teaching and learning process for AI/AN learners will improve as curriculum and assessment become more culturally relevant. Culturally relevant performance-based assessment can help schools see language and culture as integral parts of the total curriculum.

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